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ABSTRACT

The Madison School District in Phoenix (Arizona) has developed a planned and systematic two-way process of communication with both external and internal publics that has been able to build strong staff morale, utilize the support of constituents, and make timely adjustments in the district's goals and priorities. A director of community information position has been established and the top priority for all administrative staff is a district and individual school community information plan. The plan involves internal communication with school personnel and students and external communication with parents, key communicators (those who are believed and trusted by large numbers of people), legislators, new residents, church members, business and industry volunteers, and senior citizens. A number of different written and personal communication mechanisms are used. (Author/MLF)

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BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN YOUR SCHOOL SYSTEM: THE MADISON SCHOOL DISTRICT SUCCESS STORY

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Paper presented at the National Seminar of the National School Public Relations Association, Phoenix, Arizona, July 13-16, 1981.

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Introduction

ONCE UPON A TIME - It seems like 1,000 years ago - All public school systems had to do to get money was to ask. Those were also the days when everybody accepted the teachers omniscience; looked upon principals as the next thing to God and believe it or not even saw the superintendent as the educational leader for the school district and community. Those who worked for the schools had haloes.

There is no need to remind you in the audience that times have changed. Educators are no longer dieties or in some cases even respected or listened to. They must now prove their effectiveness and value and prove it again. And that once easy money (support) is now held back unless school systems can show what they intend to do with it - and virtually guarantee results beforehand.

Fred Hechenger, former Editor of the New York Times, recently wrote, "America is in Headlong Retreat from its Commitment to Education." Political confusion and economic uncertainty have shaken the peoples' faith in education as the key to financial and social success.

There is not much question anymore about the status or image of public education in this country. It needs help.

The Madison School District is located in the north central part of Phoenix. It is a city school district that combines business and corporate headquarters with upper middle-class living areas. Of the district's 50,000 residents, 6,8[illegible]0 have no children in the Madiosn School District. In spite of being a district in which several of the top private schools in Arizona are found, Madison has the distinction of providing schooling for the children of Arizona's Governor, Majority Leaders of both the Arizona House and Senate, the State Superintendent of Education and many other State and City Leaders.

In Addition, the schools provide programs for over 125 native American Indians. The foundation upon which the Madison success and reputation for "Educational Excellence in Action" has been built does not lie just in the quality of the district's instructional programs and the district's high test scores, it rests on the support and dedication of all involved --

1) Professional Educators, 2) parents, 3) community, 4) students, 5) legislators, and especially 6) the support staff.

Through a planned and systematic two-way process of communication with both our external and internal public, Madison has been able to:

1) build strong staff morale

2) utilize the support of our constituents

3) make timely adjustments as required in the district's Goals and Priorities

In a nutshell, the Madison Community and Staff Information Plan is a matter of doing the right thing and making sure that people (especially the right people) see and know it.

Where Do You Start

The Madison Communications Plan begins with the Board of Trustees.

1) The Madison Governing Board recognizes that citizens have a right to know what's happening in the schools. Therefore, the Madison Board has made a solid commitment that commits both the Board and school system personnel and resources to the implementation of a program of open communication with its various publics.
2) The school system has thus benefited from seeing that all interested parties get information, good and bad, directly from the system.

3) To accomplish this task the Board has established the position of Director of Community Information and made the establishment of a district and individual building community information plan the top priority for all Administrative Staff.

WHO ARE THE KEY AUDIENCES FOR THE DISTRICT AND INDIVIDUAL BUILDING COMMUNICATION EFFORTS

A. Staff (Internal Communications)

1. IMPROVED STAFF MORALE: PEOPLE WORK BETTER WHEN THEY ARE A PART OF A TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION SYSTEM.

2. IMPROVED STAFF EFFICIENCY: IF PEOPLE KNOW THE GAME THEY ARE PLAYING AND THE RULES, THEY DO A BETTER JOB

3. IMPROVED DECISION MAKING: IF A PROGRAM IS TRULY TWO-WAY AND DECISION MAKERS ARE GETTING INPUT, IT WILL BE BETTER AND MORE USEFUL IF IT IS COMING FROM INFORMED PEOPLE.

4. IMPROVED EXTERNAL PUBLIC RELATIONS IN TWO COUNTS:

A. If you are doing things better and people are happier, you're just going to look better to the public.

B. A well informed and involved staff and student body becomes a little arm of PR ambassadors.

Communication Vehicles Used in Madison for Staff Communications Include:

A. Superintendent's Communique

B. Board-O-Gram

C. Intercom

D. Face-to-Face Meetings and Dialogue

E. District Professional Council

F. District Classified Council

B. Parents

The most overlooked part of school communication may be the relationship with parents. If you are doing things better and students are achieving, be sure parents know. Well-informed and involved parents have become excellent PR ambassadors for the Madison School system. Vehicles used in Madison for communicating with parents include:

A. Friday Bulletin/Ask-a-question or Make-a-Suggestion Cards

B. Madison Scene

C. Staff 5-minutes-per-day call plan

D. Parent Tip Sheets

E. Homework and Parent-Teacher Conferences

F. Citizens Advisory Groups

G. School Community Councils

H. Organizational Group Luncheons with Board/Supt.

C. Students

At the other end of the scale is the student, sometimes forgotten but "our best ally". Unfortunately, too often, the minority of students get the majority of school publicity--publicity which creates a negative attitude toward student and schools.

Use the last 5 minutes of a class as a recap so students will remember what was learned. This will defeat the "whd ja do in school today?" "nutin" symdrom.

A. work study programs

B. career education

C. project business

D. homework

E. Seminars on Improving Student study habits

F. Outstanding music athletic, and performing arts programs -- given wide coverage and exposure.

D. Key Communicators

In every school and community people exist who talk to large numbers of people. They are believed and trusted. If these prople know the "school story" and receive information periodically, a two-way communication system is established. They become one of the district's most valuable communication resources. They know where to get correct information and help dispel rumors and inform the school district of rumors they hear in the community.

E. Legislators

In the past, school districts may have left the legislators alone; however, it is to the advantage of the district to talk directly to legislators to know their concerns and to express the concerns of the district.

F. New Residents

G. Churches

On-going communication and understanding

H. Business and Industry Volunteers

Adopt a school, volunteers, Project Business

I. Senior Citizens.

Summary

The time has come for us as educators to defend public education with some solid facts and figures that attest to the good things that are happening in our schools today. More than ever before we need systematic, organized excellence in public relations and community information. The extent to which we, as educators, give the public and our staff the good news about education, is the extent to which we'll get the respect and the financing that we deserve.